

## THE ODE TO CULTURAL APPROPRIATION – A CASE STUDY ON CHOIRS IN MALAYSIA

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Culture has been projected differently in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where it defines a different meaning than just image. It is beyond just peeking into the “colours” of the lives of the community, as it brings about a message that is conveyed amidst it. Along with the increase of digital literacy as well as rapid technological advancement, culture is redefined and projected into the symbols and messages that send out ideas and perspectives. Hence, the growing notion of cultural appropriation becomes a trend in realizing the significance of culture upon the community. Primarily, cultural appropriation provides an outlook into the misapplication of intellectual property, expressions, artifacts, history as well as the ways of knowledge (George, 2010).

In Malaysia, the notion poses a foreign ideal to the sociocultural construct, particularly due to the portrayal of the community which exists in the “melting pot” of culture. Nevertheless, the contribution of the digital age has realized the “salad bowl” of reality in the practice of culture (Md. Yusof & Esmacil, 2017). In the perspective of the culture and community, cultural appropriation puts forth the use of symbols of another for personal benefit, especially originating from an oppressed culture. Most often, it has expanded its influence into industries of rich cultural sharing and application and has sparked many controversies.

The performing arts industry becomes the centre of the limelight due to the range from vocal and instrumental music, dance, and theatre to pantomime, sung verse, and beyond. It enables rich cultural sharing and exchange to occur with expressions that reflect human creativity and to some extent, in other intangible cultural heritage domains. Durrant and Himonides (1998) have found that the main reasons for people partaking in choral activity are because of social and emotional dimensions. Choral performances where it is very clear the choir is performing a piece of music that’s outside of the cultural identity and cultural understanding of the conductor. Occasionally, the acts of subject appropriation are morally objectionable, but often they are not (Young & Haley, 2009). The term cultural appropriation that is applied to performing arts especially choral music is frequently misunderstood due to the complexity of having open discussions addressing culture, race, privilege, and power.

As such, the focus upon the cultural appropriation and the art of choral has often been viewed as “content appropriation”, to which pieces are exchanged with views of disapproval by the owners. “Object appropriation” would also contribute to the highlight of the study especially in integrating the natural setting of the pieces themselves. Hence, amidst the negative connotation associated, it is uncertain whether one is engaging in appropriative pedagogy when

presenting diverse music or attempting to celebrate cultures. Nevertheless, the community will still consider it as stealing intellectual properties, traditional knowledge, and unique expressions without permission from a cultural community that does not belong to the individual.

The performing arts especially choral activities have seen a growing exchange of knowledge and views when learning the cultural structure of different nations through music while indulging their respective culture (Gul, 2018). It contributes further to the changing demographics of the choral community, ensembles, and directors to become more diverse hence refining the lines between producing music that reflects our modern-day cultural landscape and potentially performing repertoires without thorough research being done into their cultures of origin (Cheli, 2020).

### **1.1 Research Questions**

The study is an attempt to discover a deeper understanding of cultural appropriation in Malaysian choir groups by the following questions:

- i. What is the level of awareness of cultural appropriation in the Malaysian choral community?
- ii. What are elements of Malaysian choral practices reflected towards cultural appropriation?
- iii. How are the cultural concepts portrayed in the Malaysian choral setting?

### **1.2 Research Objectives**

The study directs itself in understanding the occurrence of cultural appropriation in Malaysian choir groups, thus the objectives will be as follows:

- i. To measure the level of awareness on cultural appropriation in the Malaysian choral community.
- ii. To analyse the elements of Malaysian choral practice about cultural appropriation.
- iii. To understand the cultural concepts of the Malaysian choral setting.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The study applies a mixed method within both positivistic and interpretivist paradigms in understanding the occurrence of cultural appropriation in Malaysian choir groups. The utilization of both quantitative and qualitative methods provides a broader perspective within the study laid out. As in the study by Weinreich (2009), the study ensures the approaches to secure objectivity, generalizability, and reliability especially in measuring the level of awareness on cultural appropriation in the Malaysian choral community. On the other hand, it would oversee the unbiased manner especially in analysing the elements of Malaysian choral practice about cultural appropriation. Complementing the prior approach is the qualitative approach to which ensures in-depth perspectives are collected through the structured queries provided hence expanding even further the variables of the study. Hence, a survey containing items of quantitative and qualitative approaches was developed by the researchers with references to the works of Durrant and Himonides (1998) overseeing the elements of choral practices as well as Gul (2018) towards the cultural concepts of the Malaysian choral setting.

**Table 1: Participating Choral Groups in Malaysia**

No.	Name	Participating Members
1	BAVE Chamber Choir	9
2	ASWARA Chamber Choir	10
3	UiTM Chamber Choir	2
4	DBKK Choir	12
5	El Coro Ensemble	1
6	The Singaholics	25

The fulfillment of data collection is carried online in January 2021 particularly within the Restriction of Movement Order in Malaysia. The distributed survey allows for both statistical approaches as well as discussion to be extracted fulfilling the selected quantitative and qualitative approaches respectively. Before the distribution, purposive sampling was conducted to determine members of choral groups in Malaysia participate in the survey upon the determination of the sample concerning Krejcie and Morgan (1970). Based on the population derived from the selected choir group of 70 members, the study collected 59 participants as shown in Table 1 with items that are based on the 5-point Likert scale for quantitative approach as well as structured open-ended queries for the qualitative approach that is available within the distributed survey. Reliability and validity of the collected data were conducted with peer examination as well as participants' validation for the qualitative data.

The analysis of the collected data was done through the descriptive statistics based on the derived score as well as mean via the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software overseeing the first two objectives whilst thematic analysis and constant comparison were carried out upon the qualitative data gathered from the survey in which themes of the cultural concepts were determined based on the third research objective.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1 Level of Awareness on Cultural Appropriation**

The overall section based on the gathered and analysed data provides the level of awareness on cultural appropriation of members from the selected choir groups. Table 2 below provides 54.2 percent showing a high level of awareness on cultural appropriation whilst 45.8 percent at moderate. Concerning the sociocultural construct of Malaysia, it provides the presence of cultural identity and understanding upon the chosen music pieces as well as arrangements. As such, the notion provides several criteria in determining the influence and application of external culture in the industry. Young (2011) identified that 'cultural appropriation endangers a culture, not when others borrow from it, but when its members borrow too extensively from others'. Acceptable appropriation can be manifested in three ways, which are cultural exchange, cultural appreciation, and cultural consumption.

**Table 2: Level of Awareness on Cultural Appropriation**

Items	Level of Awareness	
	Frequency	Percentage
Low	-	-
Moderate	27	45.8
High	32	54.2

### 3.2 Elements of Malaysian Choral Practices Reflected Towards Cultural Appropriation (3 Highest Mean)

**Table 3: Scale of Interpretation on Elements of Malaysian Choral Practices**

Items	Mean		
	Low	Moderate	High
Elements of Malaysian choral practices	1.00-2.33	2.34-3.67	3.68 >

The indication of a moderate level of elements reflecting cultural appropriation is presented with an average mean of 2.62 hence signaling elements in the choral practices that exert the notion of cultural appropriation. Item C4 (M=3.51) puts forth the need for permission of the owning culture to perform pieces and arrangements representing the said culture. On the other hand, item C1 with (M=3.37) provides the disrespect of singing pieces of another language without understanding its meaning, as well as C3 (M=3.25), highlights the offensiveness of singing incorrectly of pieces from another culture. Nonetheless, these items showcase a moderate mean, as in Table 3, which indicates cultural appropriation that is deemed acceptable upon criteria that are met. This finding reflects previous studies where Scafdi (2018) defines cultural appropriation as unauthorized usage of another culture’s dress, dance, language, music, cuisine, folklore, religious symbols as well as traditional medicine. Furthermore, prior authorization is sought upon the application of the culture however providing an issue in the identification of the “rightful” owner of the culture itself (Vezina, 2019).

### 3.3 Cultural Concepts of the Malaysian Choral Setting

Table 4 provides the derived categories and subcategories that have been extracted from the participants of the study. The cultural concept of the Malaysian choir setting can be viewed from four angles: cultural conflicts, cultural perspectives, cultural freedom, and cultural opinion. Cultural conflicts provide interpretation over issues in the choir practices especially utilisation of cultural pieces and songs (Ibrahim, 2013). In relation, several respondents have provided religious beliefs as to the basis over cultural conflicts. Choir elements and practices are often interpreted from various perspectives to which draws out the basis of cultural appropriation. Several participants have highlighted interpretation of choir elements and practices are guided by religious views. Although music is a compulsory subject at primary

schools, there is not much focus or structure on choral singing and can be categorized as a novel idea and the cultural value of it is usually neglected (Saw, 2011).

**Table 4: Categories and Subcategories derived from the Online Survey among Choir Groups in Malaysia**

Categories	Subcategories
Cultural Conflicts	i. Norms and practices ii. Religious beliefs
Cultural Perspectives	i. Religion and beliefs ii. Personal
Cultural Freedom	i. Expression ii. Interpretation
Cultural Opinion	i. Appropriation ii. Appreciation iii. Embracement

Moreover, cultural freedom emphasizes the absence of limitation in intercultural exchanges whether it may be expressed or interpreted. Freedom of expression as extracted from the respondents highlights choir elements and practices that are free to express with any culture. Young and Haley (2009), provide some acts of subject appropriation are morally objectionable, but often they are not. The notion highlights the equal ground on every culture and the similarities that are shared which enables cross-cultural references to be made.

Additionally, cultural opinion can be extracted and observed in the choir setting of Malaysia particularly in the views towards intercultural practice. The responses of the participants indicate that the choir element and practices of the Malaysian choral community especially in the adoption of other cultural pieces and arrangements reflect cultural appreciation. According to Matvev and Milter (as cited in Rozaime and Ali, 2014), cultural awareness puts great importance on the cultural personality, skills, and knowledge of others which promotes intercultural competency.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study determined that the level of cultural appropriation of the choral community in Malaysia which ultimately reflects on the notion in the Malaysian performing arts industry. It can be observed on the criteria such as authenticity, respectfulness, and credit that are considerations needed to be weighed against the damage that is inherent in cultural appropriation. As such, this study provides an insight into the reflection of cultural appropriation in a practice of rich cultural transmission and active borrowing. Nevertheless, the presented findings do not wholly represent the Malaysian choral community at large as the sample size used is rather small aside from the highly homogenous representation. The discussion on cultural appropriation is also especially uncommon in Malaysian society which reflects the lack of previous research studies on this matter in the local scene. Other than that, although this research has discussed the cultural concepts of the Malaysian choir setting, it does not explore the cultural effects of such concepts on the Malaysian choral community which would give a more in-depth discussion regarding cultural appropriation in Malaysia

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